Interview with Richard C. Matheron

The Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training Foreign Affairs Oral History Project

AMBASSADOR RICHARD C. MATHERON

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Initial interview date: March 1989

Q: Ambassador Matheron has had wide diplomatic experience in Africa going back to his assignment as political officer in the embassy of Cameroon in 1961. Numerous other important assignments in Africa followed, culminating in his assignment as American Ambassador to the Kingdom of Swaziland from 1979 to 1982.

Ambassador Matheron, to lend perspective to this discussion of your diplomatic experience in Africa, would you please start by telling us a little about your early diplomatic assignments in Africa such as in Cameroon and Zaire in the 1960s, and about how you got involved with the U.S. Foreign Service in the first place?

MATHERON: Starting with how I got involved with the U.S. Foreign Service in the first place, I went to Europe after I graduated from the University of California at Berkeley in 1948, for a year of study and travel. That was just at the beginning of the Marshall Plan, and the Marshall Plan was hiring Americans on the spot in Europe, particularly in Paris, not for high-level positions, but for clerical positions. That's when I started.

After being in Paris for two years as a records and communications person, I wanted to get into more substantive work. I was able to get an assignment to the Special Technical and Economic Mission in Saigon, which was opened there in 1951. Robert Blum was the first

mission chief. I spent from 1951 to 1957 in Vietnam, of course with home leave and other trips outside the country.

It was particularly when I was assigned to Hue in 1953 as the only American official in Central Vietnam that I got interested in political work. My responsibilities had to do with economic development, but every time I went to Saigon, I was invited over to the embassy to chat with the ambassador and DCM about developments in Hue, which was the former imperial capital, where there were still members of the royal family.

Q: Was that Ambassador Heath, sir?

MATHERON: That was Ambassador Heath. Ed Gullion was DCM, followed by—all of a sudden his name escapes me, [later Ambassador Matheron recalled it was Robert (Rob) McClintock], and I'm really embarrassed, because he is one of the people who most inspired me. Pat Byrne was at the embassy at that time. I think you were there yourself about that time.

Q: Yes, I was. I left in about October 1953 for an administrative position in the embassy, where I'd been for two years, just before Dienbienphu, as a matter of fact.

MATHERON: I was in Hue at the time of Dienbienphu, when all the French troops were taken out of Hue. I remember that the embassy thought that we ought to completely close down our operation in Hue, but I was able to prevail upon the ambassador to let us go back. There were two of us. Because we had the assurances of the French general that if he had to evacuate, he would take us with him. I thought that the Vietnamese were looking so carefully at what we were doing that it would cause panic if we pulled out first. They thought that even though I was the economic mission person, I must be wired into the White House directly. They almost used to camp on the doorstep to see whether we were going to stay in the area.

Anyway, the point I was trying to make was that because of the encouragement of friends from the embassy, I really thought that I wanted a career as a Foreign Service officer. Another person who encouraged me to take the Foreign Service exam was John Gunther Dean, who was also in the economic mission at that time, and who was just about ready to become a Foreign Service officer himself. He has gone on to a fantastic career. I think he's had at least five different ambassadorships in the last few years.

But to make a long story short, I took the written examination at the embassy in 1955, and passed the exam, much to my surprise. In 1956, I took my oral exam in the ambassador's office. Reinhardt was ambassador at that time, and it was he and Mac Godley, who was charg# d'affaires in Cambodia, and another man, later recalled to be Consul General in Singapore, “Durby” Durbrow, as chairman. I took the exam in Saigon. Those were the old days when they asked you to sit outside while they deliberated on whether you had passed or not. I went outside.

Q: And nervously sat there outside.

MATHERON: Sat outside for about half an hour or 45 minutes. I'd been asked one question to which the chairman of the board had said I was dead wrong in my answer, and I was quite convinced I was right. I had said that the Chinese Exclusion Act was enacted in 1882. Chairman Durbrow insisted it was much later. I didn't know whether he was testing me for my knowledge or whether he was testing my willingness to stand up and defend a position, but I defended it. I was very happy there was an Encyclopaedia Britannica in the ambassador's outer office, and so while these gentlemen were deliberating, I looked up my question and knew I was right. I was practically holding it in my hand, ready to defend my position again if he'd come out and said I hadn't passed the exam. But when he came out and shook my hand and congratulated me on passing it, I didn't press the issue any further.

I then left what was not yet AID, I think it was called MSA in those days or United States Operations Mission, and became a full-fledged Foreign Service officer in May of 1957, when I went to the A-100 course. My first assignment as an FSO was in Rome as commercial officer.

In 1959, I returned to Washington and was assigned to INR in the old days when INR was still responsible for working on the National Intelligence Surveys for the intelligence community, and I spent the better part of a year studying the Korean bicycle industry and the Japanese sewing machine industry, and was not very happy in that assignment. One day my boss came in and said, “Well, I told Personnel you wouldn't be interested, but then I thought maybe I should check with you anyway. I know how dedicated you are to the Far East and really are only interested in the Far East.”

I said, “Well, what did Personnel propose?”

He said, “Well, they wanted to know whether you'd be interested in going for a year of African studies. You're not interested in Africa.”

I said, “Well, wait a minute. Tell them, yes, I'd be glad to spend a year.”

So the Department sent me for a year of graduate studies in African affairs at the African Study Center in UCLA. From there I first went to Nigeria, where I was in the political section for a couple of months. But because of an opening in Yaound#, I was transferred there. I remember at the time being quite disappointed because I thought Nigeria was a much bigger, more important country than Cameroon. But it turned out that the first assignment in Cameroon, I think, really made it for me in the Foreign Service.

It was the time when there had just been a plebiscite in British Southern Cameroon on whether they wanted to join Nigeria or the Republic of Cameroun, which had been under French mandate since World War I and was predominantly French. Much to the surprise of many people, the old British Southern Cameroons voted to join French-speaking Republic

of Cameroun. I was there at the time of Reunification. In fact, we went over to British Southern Cameroon just before “reunification,” and I'm very proud of the political analysis of the situation there. I predicted that the reunification would work.

You remember at the time there was actually a full-scale rebellion going on in ex-French Cameroun, led by the UPC, Union des Populations Camerounaises. It was a very leftist rebellion, which had a lot of other origins, ethnic and sociological, but it was considered by many in the two Cameroons and in the West as a communist revolution.

On the other side, on the English-speaking side, there was fear that once the two countries were united, the rebellion would spread over there. I and my British colleague, with whom I remained friends for a long time, traveled together. We were both junior officers and we came up with individual reports, of course, to our respective governments, saying, “This thing is not going to fall apart.” We're now 28 years later. Cameroon is both an English-speaking and French-speaking country, and the system has worked. It's one of the relatively few success stories in the African continent in the intervening period.

Q: You were eventually assigned as U.S. consul in Bukavu, Zaire, about 1964. When you were consul in Bukavu, I believe there was a protracted period of rebel warfare and rebellion against Premier Moise Tshombe's government perhaps about the time you arrived or shortly thereafter. Can you tell us a little bit about that? What was life like in an American consulate, for instance, at that time? What size staff did we have there?

MATHERON: We had a very small staff. We had three American officers, a communicator, and one FSN secretary. The previous consul's wife had worked part-time, but we were not authorized a full-time secretary, so we did our own secretarial work, sometimes with the help of TDY personnel that would come up from Leopoldville, as Kinshasa was called at the time. There was a beautiful consular residence right on Lake Kivu. It's one of the most beautiful spots I've ever served in.

Within days of my arrival, a full-scale rebellion broke out in the Kivu. There was a Mulele rebellion going on, which had started in Kwilu Province in 1964, and this was the eastern part of it, both certainly radical rebellions supported by the Chinese. The Chinese had an enormous embassy in Bujumbura. I was just reviewing my reports the other day, and they took advantage of a lot of ethnic unrest in the area to fuel a rebellion against a government which had really fallen apart shortly after 1960, at the time of independence. You remember that basically the central government in Leopoldville was not able to establish and maintain strong authority.

Q: With President [Joseph D.] Mobutu coming to power in 1965, did the area settle down then during the rest of your assignment there?

MATHERON: Basically the area settled down. After the onslaught of the rebellion against Bukavu itself in 1964, when the rebels actually entered the town, this was the first time that the Congolese Army had stood and fought its ground against the rebels. For this I give a lot of credit to an American military advisor who was there at the time, Colonel William Dodds, who had very good rapport with the Congolese commander, and got him to station his troops well. Bukavu is built on five peninsulas, and the American colonel showed the Congolese colonel that if he stationed his troops at the beginning of these peninsulas, the troops would have no place to retreat except into Lake Kivu. The Congolese Army stood and held its ground for the first time, and the rebels were not able to take over.

You recall that there was a lot of magic in this rebellion. The rebels believed, and a lot of the people believed, including the Congolese Army, that they had been bathed in Mulele water or Mulele medicine, and that they were invulnerable, that ordinary bullets wouldn't kill them because they had these magical powers. Well, these magical powers had never been properly tested before this day in August of 1964, and all of a sudden they discovered that they didn't have magical powers, and that the Army's bullets would actually

kill them. This was a revelation to a very ill-trained army, as well as it was to the rebels themselves.

At the same time, we had C-130s stationed in the Congo that were instrumental in flying up Congolese reinforcements from other parts of the country, particularly Katangan militia. It was a victory purely on the military side, but it also had a psychological side because it showed that the rebels actually were being resisted and could be defeated. At that time, Mobutu was the chief of staff of the Army. It wasn't until a year later that he took over as president of the country.

Q: To keep the discussion on Africa, perhaps we could march along to somewhere almost a dozen years later, when you became charg# d'affaires to Ethiopia. You were charg# d'affaires in Addis Ababa. That was 1977-78. Why did we not have a U.S. ambassador assigned to post then? Had we terminated development aid, for instance, at that point?

MATHERON: You recall that the Ethiopian revolution took place in 1974, and Emperor Haile Selassie was overthrown and kept in prison, and he died a year later. Nobody to this day is sure exactly how he died.

1974 was a period where America's focus was not on foreign affairs so much as the Watergate problem. Ethiopia didn't have very high priority in the administration's considerations. The previous ambassador had left, and the administration really went for many, many months before even thinking about appointing a new ambassador.

At that time, the first person then named was Ambassador Godley, the same Godley who had been on my panel years before. He had, just previous to this nomination, been ambassador to Laos. He had also been named Assistant Secretary for East Asian Affairs, but was turned down by the Senate. I think his nomination was withdrawn, but it was obvious that he was not going to get the East Asian position, because people in Congress were unhappy with the role that he had played in Laos, a very activist role, quite similar, or

even more, than the activist role that he had been when I knew him as ambassador to the Congo.

Although the Ethiopian Government had originally given agr#ment, there was an article in one of the Washington newspapers where somebody referred to him as “the butcher of Laos.” The Ethiopians saw this and asked us to withdraw his assignment to Ethiopia. This did not make the Department very happy. They thought that we were naming a good man and the Ethiopians were being too radical in turning him down.

Then in 1977, at the beginning of the war between Ethiopia and Somalia, all of a sudden the Ethiopians closed down our mission in Asmara, up in Eritrea, where we had had a very important communications station and a big consulate staff, and they also closed our military mission and also picked off USIS at the time and reduced the size of the embassy, primarily because they interpreted our actions as being hostile because we had not come to their assistance. Despite the fact that they were quite radical, they used to make the point then, and to me afterwards, that Ethiopia was a natural, historic ally of the United States. When Somalia had invaded, we had not helped Ethiopia to defend itself, and if we were not going to help Ethiopia defend itself, then get out. Well, this was not very conducive to improving our relations, so we still did not name an ambassador.

In 1978, it was decided that there must be some way to improve relations, and a special mission came out from Washington, headed by David Aaron, with Ambassador Bill Harrop, who discussed the state of relations with Ethiopia. Concurrently, at the same time, we had proposed Fred Chapin as ambassador to Ethiopia as a sign that we hoped to improve relations, but the Ethiopians dragged their feet for weeks and weeks and weeks and weeks before granting agr#ment to Chapin. We said, “If you don't grant agr#ment within a few days, we're going to withdraw the nomination.” At that point I was called in and told, yes, they would grant agr#ment to him. So Ambassador Chapin arrived in July of 1978.

But the period when I was there, from October of 1977, was referred to as the period of "Red Terror" in Addis. There were thousands of people killed by one leftist group fighting against another. It was probably one of the grimmest periods of my whole career, although we felt relatively safe within the embassy compound. Addis was one of the few capital cities in Africa where all of the major embassies had compounds. In Addis these dated back before the turn of the century, when Menelik had given grants of land to foreign governments on the edge of the city, mainly to help protect him from feudal lords who he was afraid might come in. Although we felt that we were not personally the targets of animosity, that our lives were not really in danger, we still went to bed every night to the sound of machine gun fire just a few hundred yards away, where the government was really killing people who were accused of not being 100% loyal, even anybody having a one-dollar bill.

Previous to 1974, American dollars circulated in Ethiopia, much as they do in Liberia and in Panama, as normal currency. So a lot of people had American currency from way before. Anybody discovered with any American currency was summarily shot on the spot by the "Kebeles," and it was a very grim period.

Q: Did not a lot of people, to escape the indiscriminate killings, flee to the Sudan during that period, also?

MATHERON: Yes, exactly. From then and continuing on, but the situation in Sudan was bad. It was really a very brutal period.

Q: I read in the history of that era whereby at one point the Israeli foreign minister had disposed selling arms to the Ethiopians to repel the Somalia-backed invasion, while Ethiopia, at the same time, denounced the U.S. and other nations for perhaps backing and aiding Somalia. Of course, today that would be a little bit strange that our ally in the Middle East would be supporting one side, and we were supporting the other. Maybe that's strange; I don't know. How do you feel about that?

MATHERON: I don't have proof of that, but I suspect that it was correct. Although the Ethiopians did not have formal diplomatic relations with Israel, they had informal relations. Ethiopia, despite the fact that it was a Marxist country, still saw itself as the old Christian Ethiopian empire surrounded by Islam. There's always been sort of a natural alliance between Ethiopia and Israel, because if you remember, even the Ethiopian monarchy traced its origins back to King Solomon and the Queen of Sheba. There's much more of a special relationship between Ethiopia and Israel that dates back so many hundreds of years.

Q: It's an interesting point in history, that connection.

MATHERON: Very interesting.Discussing American aid at that time, we could provide relief assistance to Ethiopia. While I was there, we invoked the Hickenlooper Amendment on regular development assistance, because Ethiopia had failed to show movement towards reimbursing the companies that had been nationalized shortly after the beginning of the revolution. Just a little show of good faith on their part would have been enough to keep us from invoking the Hickenlooper Amendment. It was the first time that Hickenlooper was invoked in the history of the amendment. But relations would warm up just a little bit, and then something would happen, and they would cool off. I must say that Washington, over the years, has become less and less tolerant of getting kicked in the mouth, in the rear, whatever it is.

I remember when Congressman Tsongas came out. He had been a Peace Corps volunteer there. I was with him at a ministers' meeting at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The head of the Americas Department, who had studied in America, said, “You know, Congressman, we are poor and we are weak, but we are proud.”

And Congressman Tsongas, much to his credit, said, “I know exactly what you mean. We are rich and we are strong, but we're proud, too.” And they understood. You could talk about pride to the Ethiopians, and they understood that very well.

That was certainly a very exciting time in my career. At one point I take credit. —We got word in the morning that they were going to break diplomatic relations in the afternoon. I sent a flash to Washington and told them what I proposed to say, because I was sure that Washington couldn't get a coordinated position back in time. I got an answer back within about half an hour, saying words to the effect, “Use your approach and good luck.” I always felt that if you could present a position to Washington that didn't require a lot of coordinating between all of the agencies, which was based on a common-sense approach, you usually got the go-ahead.

So much has been talked about, whether diplomats are just messengers for Washington, or whether they actually have influence on diplomatic relations. I think a good diplomat can often lead the superiors in Washington to come to a position much faster if he or she takes the lead. One of the sources of my personal pride was that relations were not broken at that time, and continued on. It's always been touch and go, but at least there was not a complete break that day.

Q: Great, Mr. Ambassador. About 1979, I understand you were appointed as U.S. Ambassador to the Kingdom of Swaziland. Could you briefly describe the geographic location and the surrounding political entities in talking about Swaziland?

MATHERON: Swaziland is a country about the size of New Jersey, which is sandwiched between the Republic of South Africa and Mozambique. It's a fascinating country in its own right, but from the regional point of view and from the point of view of broad U.S. interests, its geographic position was most important. Swaziland lies between Marxist Mozambique, which in those days was much more vehemently Marxist than it is today, and South Africa, which is ruled by the white minority and is an extremely conservative government, to say the least. Swaziland was a territory where there was quite a bit of movement back and forth between these two very different r#gimes, one in Mozambique and one in South Africa.

Swaziland was fascinating in its own right because it was one of the few kingdoms left in the world where the King had real power. Although he ruled with consensus of the people, and there was a Parliament, there was no doubt about the fact that he was number one in the country. In Lesotho, which is surrounded by South Africa, the King is an important person, but he is not the center of real power as he was in Swaziland.

From the time Botswana, Swaziland, and Lesotho gained independence in 1968, we had had one ambassador accredited to three countries. The ambassador used to live in Gaborone, the capital of Botswana, and visit Lesotho and Swaziland from time to time. In 1979, the Carter administration decided that these other countries were of sufficient importance that we ought to have a resident ambassador in both Lesotho and Swaziland. So I was the first one to spend full-time in Swaziland.

Q: Speaking of Swaziland, in my review of what I knew before, which was not very extensive at all, I picked up the idea that Swaziland and most of the neighboring African nations rely on South Africa for almost all basic needs, including railway transport routes, power, lots of foods, steel, pharmaceuticals, chemicals, machinery, construction materials, and even jobs for thousands of their people. If that were true in the time you were there, could you readily agree on the current sanctions that we have instituted towards South Africa today? How do you feel about that?

MATHERON: I have mixed feelings. I basically think sanctions are not a very effective way of trying to bring a change in internal affairs of countries. I believe that sanctions would not only be detrimental to neighboring countries, but also to the black population in South Africa itself. However, I subscribe to the position taken by Secretary [George] Shultz, or rather the commission he set up to study our relations at the time of sanctions. The point they made was that the United States' President should show real interest in changing the situation in South Africa. It is in the interest of the United States to bring about rapid social change towards majority rule in South Africa. If, in fact, the President of the United States

really showed that he cared about it, was personally interested, that would be a lot more effective than sanctions.

But I can say now, quite frankly, that I believe that President Reagan paid only lip service to the anti-apartheid movement, but there was no indication that his heart and soul was in it. My perception is that he didn't care. The South Africans knew that. The South African whites knew it, the South African blacks knew it, that there was not a strong commitment on his part.

Q: During your time there, Mr. Ambassador, the dependence of other nations around South Africa probably did exist and probably still does today.

MATHERON: Oh, yes, very much so. In fact, the economies were very integrated between South Africa and the neighboring countries. Even many of Swaziland's products consumed in Swaziland would go out of Swaziland into South Africa for some processing and back into Swaziland. I remember one American family in Swaziland who really felt determined not to buy any products from South Africa. The mother, head of household, after a few weeks, threw up her arms and said, “There's no way that you can do this. The Swazis don't boycott South African products. I can't even get jam or jelly made from Swazi fruit that don't go across the border to be turned into jam.” So she sort of gave up on the project.

Swaziland produces electricity, South Africa produces electricity, but the grids are tied together. So sometimes when we had a power outage, it was not because of a power failure in Swaziland, but a power failure in South Africa. The South Africans have enormous influence in the country. On the whole, South Africa has provided a great deal of development in the region.

Q: Were you in attendance at King Sobhuza's diamond jubilee celebration?

MATHERON: Yes. There was an American delegation which flew out. It was headed by Vern Orr, who was then Secretary of the Air Force, and Mrs. Ruppe, the Peace Corps director, was a member of the delegation, as were various people, including Don Defore, who was a Hollywood personality. We had one of the largest delegations to the diamond jubilee celebrations, and it turned out to be a marvelous event. Everybody had a good time, and things worked quite well. This group of Americans, many of whom had very little contact with Africa before, were really very impressed by the Swazis' ability to put on a first-rate international event.

Q: I noted, in reading some background, that King Sobhuza had some 70 wives and perhaps as many as 150 children, binding all the significant family groupings in his clan together. Do you feel, if this is true, that that's politically significant to his long reign of 60-some years that he was in power there?

MATHERON: I'm glad that you got your numbers so good, because generally people say, “Oh, he had 500 wives and 2,000 children.” But your numbers are very close to those estimated by a very renowned anthropologist on the subject.

Part of the system is that the King have a wife from every one of the major clans of the Swazi people. Actually, the Swazi peoples occupy an area greater than Swaziland today. It's part of the political cohesiveness of the Swazi people. Of course, Swaziland is one of the very few countries in Africa which is primarily from one ethnic group. Ninety-eight percent of the population of Swaziland are Swazis, as compared to places like Zaire or Ethiopia or Nigeria or even smaller countries where there's a much greater ethnic diversity.

Also, Sobhuza was a very clever man, although he was a traditional chief. He had one foot in the past, but he certainly had one foot in the present and in the future. He's one of the few political leaders that I've known who had a real vision for his country. A lot of the Swazis made a great deal about tradition, and it was a fascinating country to live in, because there were so many events going on which were traditional African events. I think

largely thanks to his personality, he was able to always be ahead of tradition and using tradition for political purposes. He was very much a man of the twentieth century.

Q: What do you feel was perhaps your most important accomplishment in U.S.-Swaziland affairs during your ambassadorship there?

MATHERON: I think probably the most concrete accomplishment was negotiating an agreement to establish an FBIS station there, as you know, Foreign Broadcast Information Service, which serves all of southern Africa. The only other FBIS post on the African continent is in Abidjan. It took the better part of a year and a half to negotiate the agreement, because in Swaziland, foreign diplomats are negotiating with the modern sector of government, which meant the prime minister and the deputy prime minister and the minister of communications. They had Cabinet meetings, and they made decisions, but then it went down to the royal court—I say “down” because it was at a lower altitude in the country—and there it would be mulled over among the King and the traditional advisors to the King, who would send messages back very subtly about some of the considerations. Sobhuza never made snap decisions. He was a very thoughtful person and really wanted to bring all the traditional people aboard.

So although I wouldn't say it was a difficult negotiation, it was one of those things that you had to know how to pace. You had to keep reminding them of U.S. interest, but not so often that it would annoy them. Eventually, we got a good answer and a good agreement to set up that station, which has turned out to be enormously valuable to the intelligence community.

Q: How many hours a day would a station like that broadcast normally?

MATHERON: They do not broadcast but listen to broadcasts from Mozambique and South Africa and Zambia. It's an overt intelligence operation; essentially what they do is listen to all of the public radio in the southern half of the continent, which is much broader than just

the immediate area around South Africa, they then put together daily summaries of what's being said on the radio, which I know is a very important tool of analysis in Washington.

Q: That summary would go back to Washington, but was it also utilized in any other fashion or broadcast in any fashion at all to any area?

MATHERON: FBIS' job was to provide Washington with all of the material broadcast of any political, economic, or sociological interest within the whole area. Obviously, in Washington it was screened and not absolutely every word is reprinted, only the most important part. But there's a booklet that comes out that's half an inch thick every day on radio broadcasts just from that area. There are similar ones for the northern part of Africa, for the Middle East, for the Far East, less in Europe, because it's less important in Europe, because we have so much more direct access to information.

Usually in the Third World, when news breaks, it breaks on radio rather than in the press. I guess we can say that in our own world, too. But governments use the radio a great deal more. So that was a very useful asset that the United States has.

They were naturally a little bit uneasy about having such a station, although Swaziland has been closer to our position in the UN than many other African countries. They still are afraid of being tainted as being “lackeys of the imperialists” and so on. They want to keep up their credentials in the Non-Aligned Movement. I think this is less important now than it was ten years ago, but it certainly used to be terribly important, what the Non-Aligned Movement thought. They didn't want to be pariahs and outcasts for being too friendly to the Americans. At the same time, they wanted to be very helpful.

Q: Now for the benefit of the young research scholars of international and diplomatic history, can you give us, Mr. Ambassador, your view of the Foreign Service as a career? How did you find it, and what would you find it, in so many words, beneficial or otherwise, for the young research scholar today as applied to a possible career for himself?

MATHERON: As I look back, the Foreign Service was very good to me, and I think that I got a maximum amount of satisfaction out of my career, certainly. But I'll be very frank. One of the reasons is that I had such a desire to travel and see the world and study other cultures and be a representative of my own country and our culture. The Foreign Service provided me that.

I am asked nowadays about whether I recommend to a young person to take the Foreign Service exam, and I have very mixed feelings on the subject. I think the process is too long and too agonizing for the few who have a real chance of succeeding and getting in through the exam process. Then with the tenure system, you still are not a real Foreign Service officer until you've spent a few years and are tenured. The promotion rate is slow. I think that the rewards are less great than they used to be.

You will recall that when we went into the Foreign Service, there were some perks that people don't have now. I hate to sound so crassly materialistic, but I remember when we were able to fly first class and make first-class transatlantic liner crossings. The mantle of the Foreign Service almost had a mystic quality. The idea of being a Foreign Service officer meant that you were belonging to a very special, elite group of meritorious people. I think part of the changes reflect a change in society in general. I'm sure this is probably true of many other professions. I think the Foreign Service is trying to do too many things.

As Ron Spiers, the Under Secretary for Management, has pointed out, really the biggest problem in the Foreign Service today is how to deal with spouses, how to provide good careers not to just one person, but to two people in modern America. It's almost undoable if you're going to have a system which assigns people on a worldwide basis according to the needs of the Service and the talents of the individual and still run a system — not only tandem within the Foreign Service, but they try to cooperate with the Navy and other parts of the government to have tandem assignments.

In my latter days as Senior inspector, we found that in so many posts, the spouses were completely out of it, even those who wanted to be. The whole culture has changed so much that the idea that Foreign Service officer and his or her spouse are a team has gone by the board. The spouse gets very little satisfaction out of the Foreign Service, and consequently, doesn't feel like contributing much to it.

I hate to be sort of an old man who looks back at the good old days and think that it has changed.

Q: That's a more recent phenomenon than I can recall personally, but I understand what you mean.

MATHERON: It's a real dilemma for Foreign Service management.

Q: Anything you would like to say in particular before we conclude this discussion, Mr. Ambassador?

MATHERON: I'm happy to participate in this oral history project. I think it's an important one. I think that so much experience is lost as people move out of the Foreign Service.

Q: I agree with you. I think it will. Thank you, Mr. Ambassador, for a very interesting and sharp account of your experiences while chief of mission in Swaziland and in other African countries. Thank you very much.

MATHERON: Thank you.

End of interview